

AUGUST 18, 1994

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PUBLIC HEALTH ADVISORY

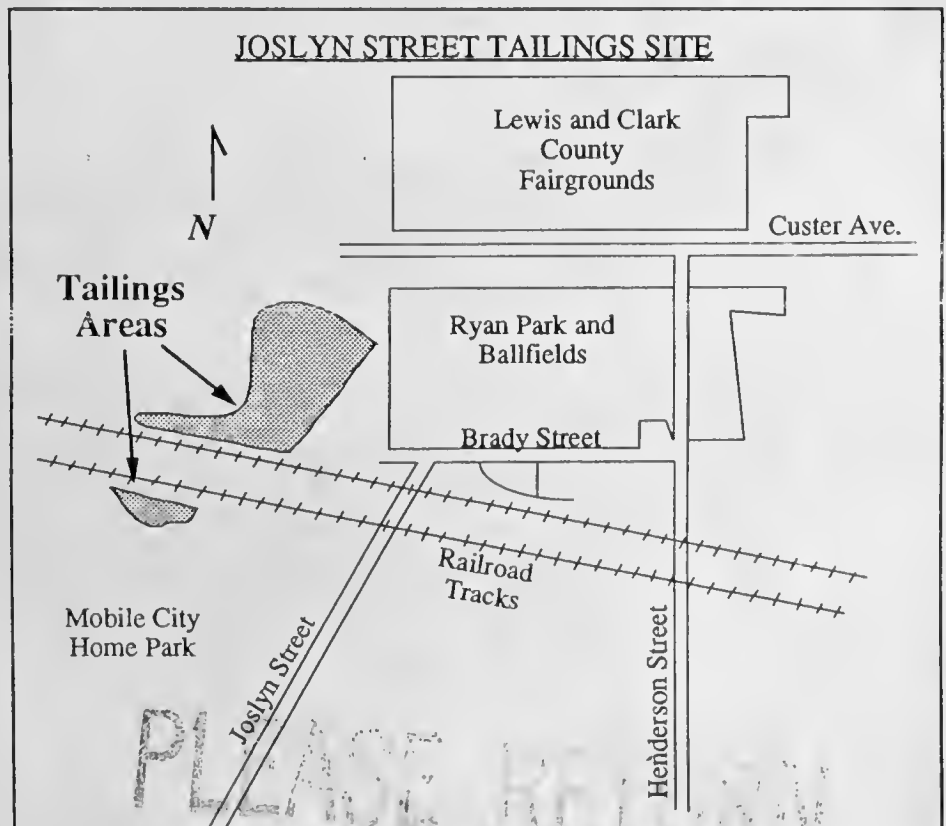
From the Montana Department of Health and Environmental Sciences and the Federal Agency for Toxic Substances and Disease Registry

INTRODUCTION

The Montana Department of Health and Environmental Sciences (MDHES) is advising the public to avoid a mine tailings area near Joslyn and Brady streets on the west side of Helena. The tailings are located adjacent to the railroad tracks and also near the Ryan Ballfield Complex (please see map). The tailings of greatest concern lie on the north and south sides of the railroad tracks. Recent samples taken from the tailings revealed exceedingly high levels of arsenic and high levels of lead. Prolonged direct contact with the tailings could be hazardous to human health. The public should stay away from the obvious tailings area. The tailings appear as light-colored soils with little or no vegetation growing on them. On Thursday and Friday, August 18 and 19, MDHES will post warning signs around the site.

WHO IS INVOLVED WITH THE SITE?

The Montana Department of State Lands discovered the site recently during investigation of abandoned mines and mine mills. Because MDHES believes there are current, viable landowners at the site, the Abandoned Mine Program turned the site over to the MDHES State Superfund hazardous substances cleanup program. MDHES has requested and received assistance from the Agency for Toxic Substances and Disease Registry (ATSDR) in Atlanta, Georgia. ATSDR is a federal public health agency specializing in human health effects due to exposure to hazardous substances. A toxicologist with ATSDR has recommended that Superfund prevent access to the site, keep the tailings from being carried off-site by wind or surface water run-off and continue to collect information about the extent of contamination.



MDHES Superfund personnel have also met with city and county government representatives as well as Babe Ruth Baseball and Small Fry Football Association representatives.

WHO IS MOST AT RISK?

Anyone who comes in direct contact with the tailings may be at risk. By comparison the levels of arsenic found in the tailings are about 60 times higher than arsenic found in contaminated East Helena soils. Samples of soil taken at the ballfield indicate that contaminant levels are normal and are not at levels of public concern. Based on available information, ATSDR says the ballfields are safe for regular use. However, Superfund strongly advises the public stay away from the tailings areas.

HOW CAN ARSENIC AND LEAD IN THE TAILINGS GET INTO MY BODY?

Tailings are fine-grained and may be carried by wind or water. A person may come in contact with the tailings by ingestion, inhalation or skin exposure. In addition, pets may get into the tailings and get the contaminated dust on their coats, then bring it home to their owners.

ARE ARSENIC AND LEAD DANGEROUS?

Yes, both arsenic and lead are considered hazardous substances. Arsenic is known to cause cancer and may also cause nausea, vomiting, diarrhea, abnormal heart rhythm, and blood vessel damage. Exposure to lead can affect almost every organ and system in the body but the central nervous system is the most sensitive. Children are especially susceptible to lead poisoning. Lead may also cause learning difficulties and behavioral problems in children. Lead is associated with high blood pressure in adults.

WHERE CAN I OBTAIN MORE INFORMATION?

MDHES has more detailed information about the site and will be happy to share it with the public. Call site Project Manager Denise Martin or Superfund Information Officer Jane Heath at 444-1420 in Helena.

WHAT WILL HAPPEN NEXT?

Once MDHES completes a review of ownership records and site history, potentially liable persons will be asked to clean up the site. If potentially liable persons are unable to respond in a timely manner, MDHES will contact the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency to assist with emergency removal.